Edge of a precipice – Part 1
April 13, 2021

Mahboob Qadir

Do we really know or care to know what is happening around us? How have we been treated by the state, society, leadership and the clergy and where are we being taken to? These are not just questions out of curiosity or academic interest but the ones whose answers will determine the general direction of our future and that of the coming generations. Do we understand what kind of wet blankets we are wrapped into and sinking while the world around us is moving away from us and evolving in a broad sunny manner? As a country and as a nation immediately after Jinnah's untimely death, we have been first made to wade into conceptual puddles, on to ideological mud flats, followed by unsheltered exposure to raw notions' rain and sleet and now we are almost hydroplaning disoriented out of control. That in simple words means a complex but quite comprehensive disaster and a looming system crash.

Let me briefly recollect the sequence of events and how we were led from pit to pit and on to the rim of the precipice. Soon after independence we got inducted into Kashmir war which has been left simmering by the world powers by design ever since. However that inconclusive war unfortunately created a psychosis of military insecurity in Pakistani establishment viz-a-viz India which led to seeking help from abroad thus diverting a newly formed country's vital energies from socio economic development to military preparedness, a classic Sparta replay somewhat. This turned out to be a fateful diversion as it opened the door to a different and a ruthless breed of opportunists, power seekers and eventually plunderers of the national treasury.

SEATO and CENTO defense pacts crafted by the US became an attractive option which Pakistan joined. Soon we got enough but minimum US military hardware to feel reasonably confident of defending ourselves should India aggress. Auspiciously India desisted and a peaceful interregnum became available which afforded space for an all-round improvement in the standard of living, industry, agriculture, education, health, trade and exports. It was because the nation had tremendous potential and our resources were relatively freed from feeding the expanding security psychosis.

Pakistan was coming into its own and beginning to realize its intrinsic and international potential. But that was not scripted. Sadly corresponding political system did not really evolve or was not allowed to evolve.

Yet the country was looking good and moving on an upwards trajectory, economic indicators were healthy, regarded well and had a positive image overall. We were at a break out point but that was enough. Two diametrically opposite but corrosive forces were already at work. The religious doctrinaires and the eruptive but madly ambitious politicians. Let's discuss clergy latter, politicians first.

After an initial decade of chaos and mediocrity there appeared a young ambitious politician from Larkana who knew the art of effective speech and had a very sharp mind with an acute sense of political opportunism. He soon entered the inner circle of President Ayub, the then military cum civilianized ruler of the country and was raised to the level of the foreign minister. Just the spot that he needed. President Ayub was then passing through a period of self-doubt as agitations were taking place country wide led by Mohtarma Fatima Jinnah, a formidable political opponent and a sister of the Founder of the Nation. Her credentials were

impeccable. Seeing the moment opportune Bhutto worked on President Ayub's ego and vulnerability both and as foreign minister, cleverly led the country into a precipitate war with India again over Kashmir in 1965.

Pakistan Army did not have the necessary military superiority nor requisite war materials stamina to fight a decisive war over Kashmir with India. Consequently Kashmir could not be liberated but Pakistan survived a military defeat by the skin of its teeth and managed a stalemate through the superlative grit and guts of its armed forces and a highly motivated nation. Indian counter-offensive was stopped in its tracks and repulsed. This entire episode must be viewed as a betrayal of a different but very grave kind. Just when Pakistan was on its way to becoming a modern and prosperous country with great amount of self-confidence and an all-round progress, it was plunged into an unwinnable war.

US military aid was turned off just as Pakistan needed it the most during the 65 war. It was the first indicator of US fickle mindedness or her strategic limitations in our region and should have served as a measure of what to expect from this fleet footed ally in future too. But we are always short on analysis and late in learning our lessons and had by then fairly deeply interwoven our state and personal (civil military leadership and senior bureaucracy's) interests into US foreign policy articulation in the region. The country was to pay dearly for this ill-considered reliance on US support in times to come.

Meanwhile Z.A. Bhutto had kept his lines of communication open with the US, presenting himself as a more dependable and politically savvy leader. Soon after the war he realized it was time to jump the ship which he had himself helped steer to the sand bar. He acted as an angry patriot, parted ways and formed his famous but ill-starred Pakistan People's Party (PPP). Shortly Ayub had to go, leaving the field open to a whisky-soaked Gen Yahya Khan and a highly manipulative Bhutto whose agenda was to seize power but before that the playfield had to be leveled.

He wanted unimpeded political power but there were stumbling blocks .The larger than life Army, the powerful industrial lobby, a strong bureaucracy, private monopoly over banking system and most of all a numerically larger East Pakistani vote bank. From what could be reasonably deduced, he seemed to have devised a great gamble, which could well draw a commendation from Machiavelli. It unfolded in the following sequence. General elections were held where PPP secured a majority in West Pakistan and Mujib's Awami League from East Pakistan bagged an overall majority in the country. That created a double dilemma. He prevented West Pakistani MNAs from attending NA session in Dakkah and prevailed upon Yahya to crack down on strident Mujib. Civil war broke out and eventually the Indian military intervened in East Pakistan where despite its valiant fight, Pakistan Army suffered a crushing defeat in 71.

Yahya was made to resign and Bhutto took over as the Chief Executive of the truncated Pakistan. From this time onwards Bhutto started off with the systematic decimation of the armed forces, nationalization of industries and banks, destruction of the tested and tried structure of the bureaucracy and an indiscriminate proliferation of deliberate social anarchy. He was to pay with his life for taking on too much at the same time together. Had he been a little patient and more discreet, chances of him surviving for a longer time could have improved. He was the nimblest dancer on Pakistan's political stage. However, what he did could be termed easily as fascism Bhutto style from which the country has never recovered. A wonderful synergy and very desirable national synchronization were destroyed by one man's ego and whims.

Bhutto's indiscriminate nationalization of perfectly productive and running industries, banks and large corporations brought the economy almost to a standstill. It effectively discouraged the environment of purposeful entrepreneurship and long term investment in major projects and injected a fly-by-night investment, quick profit and fly-out kind of highly insensitive and irresponsible sentiment in the businesses in Pakistan. Naturally the quality and reliability of our industrial output and other manufacturing undertakings suffered badly. Major businessmen shifted their main businesses out of the country maintaining only a nominal presence leaving the field open to the novice, the opportunist and the unreliable. From the consequences point of view it is fair to conclude that Bhutto's nationalization as the economic sabotage of the worst order.

More sinister had been the deliberate destruction of our old traditional social order, harmony among communities and sectoral balance. The ensuing chaos shook the very roots of our society and our social structure slowly but irreversibly disintegrated, collapsing upon itself. the social anarchy we see today is firmly rooted in the devastating free for all but responsible to none society that the scourge of Bhuttoism created to perpetuate himself in power through widespread chaos, distrust and disorder.

Having smashed the time tested systems late, Bhutto failed to provide a better, for that matter, any alternative concept of economic management, social framework and governance mechanism. Meanwhile, the armed forces shifted into a self-preserving mode. A huge pandemonium had started to set in. Popular reaction began to build up as PPP rigged next elections. Power structure had started to shudder under pressure already. At this juncture, he contrived to deliver a fatal blow to our delicately poised religious/sectarian equilibrium hoping to appear as the champion of the faith and thus be able to deflect politico-religious agitation being mounted against him. Most unfortunately this is where mullahs appear on stage in force.

Deceitfully, as a first step, he banned liquor and declared Ahmadis as non-Muslims, playing right into the hands of the very subterranean religious lobby that Quaid-e-Azam had kept at an arm's length right from the start. People saw through this smoke screen and nobody believed Bhutto's opaque religious credentials. The trick proved to be bland and stale. Ambitious Gen Zia-ul-Haq, already lurking in the wings overthrew him replacing one fascist monstrosity with another equally pernicious military-sectarian demagoguery .We as a nation were walked from one pit to the other to be deceived once again this time in the name of faith, our last remaining but primary bastion. And what a comprehensive moral destruction it since has been.

Edge of a precipice? – Part 2
April 14, 2021

Mahboob Qadir
Gen Zia appeared on the podium not as the champion of democracy but as the savior and custodian of true faith. He wowed to restore our mutilated social equilibrium via the faith module, not quite realizing that faith or religion is just one part of a person's moral intellectual make up and not the entire framework.

This dangerously faulty view could be attributed to his childhood in an essentially orthodox Muslim cleric's household. He could not appreciate or perhaps accept that those of a different faith could also be good human beings and equally good Pakistanis or that Pakistan's best political option was the way Jinnah had declared. With this erratic and ill-founded presumption he proceeded to 're-Islamize' the country according to his misty lights and his lights eventually came to be powered by Saudi petro dollars and Salafi dogma. He wasn't greedy but that does not mean he was a visionary too. His dangerous liaison with mullahs and picking up their recipe for social reengineering has proved to be utterly disastrous for the health of our gasping society, political direction and world view. He landed us into a huge crater of conceptual quicks and full of sectarian pestilence and medieval self-notions. Where the more we struggle to come out the more we sink in.

Today's insufferable level of sectarian polarization and biting animosity can be laid squarely placed at Gen Zia's door, whereas the flood gates were opened by Bhutto.

What followed can be easily summarized as the elements of discord which came together in an equation of inevitable national disaster for our country. Zia busied himself in rooting out Bhutto era deformities, crudely reintroducing various religious practices like forced prayers, a sort of religious police, public lashings and planting Ulema of his ilk in public offices for the first but ominous time. Ominous because the mullah tasted the sweet taste of state power and then on has been maneuvering endlessly to remain in power or relevant to power. His Salafist leanings and country's poor economic state drew him closer to Saudis who were looking for just such an overture.

It resulted in throwing open the doors of our well-settled religious compound to Saudi interventions like construction of hot points- the single minaret Wahabist mosques, selective funding of like-minded ulema and madrassas in Pakistan and induction of madrassa students in specific Saudi universities. This mass of local Salafis was to soon become useful for different but deadlier purposes. Meanwhile the state of Pakistan came up with laws and regulations like Blasphemy law, reportedly in a hurry to please Saudis and in the process gain confidence of, by now, quite vocal religious lobby in the country. Both considerations turned out to be calamitous for the nation and brought about a different set of disasters for the country. What a pity.

Just as popular sentiment was turning against late Gen Zia's manipulations of state power and our last remaining safe quadrant that is our faith, two defining events happened in our neighborhood almost simultaneously. Iran was swept by Khominite revolution and the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. Both were aggressive ideologies and threatened our remaining equilibrium or what Zia thought he had restored, seriously and in Iran's case radically. Almost overnight Gen Zia and his regime became apple of the eye of the US for military-political reasons to be pitched against the Soviets, and of Saudis as a tool to put some fear of God into aggressive Iranian regime who was threatening a revolt in the Middle East openly. That was the start of the Iran-KSA proxy war in Pakistan and one more branding iron for us.

US and Saudi geo-strategic interests in the region converged in Pakistan and our military leadership saw a golden opportunity to perpetuate itself in power and earn some money for the country too. It joined the secret jihad alliance against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and indirectly to contain Iranian revolutionary influence. Both backfired to our regret. Iran was made to feel insecure to which by 1981 it responded by coaxing our Shia minority to become belligerent. The Soviets were defeated in Afghanistan with Pakistan's invaluable help. We hosted and armed Afghan resistance and inherited the basket full of

vipers that we had fed to grow.

Gen Zia had served their purpose and was killed in a mysterious plane crash soon after. US abandoned Afghanistan post-haste which promptly plunged into anarchy and internecine war for turf and power, whose malicious breed TTP and related terrorism has terribly tainted Pakistan in global community, polarized our nation, severely retarded economic progress and caused very large number of dead and wounded among LEAs and civilians. Heavy footed US has always created mayhem, chaos and disorder wherever they have intervened, which became the case with Afghanistan, before that in Somalia and afterwards in Iraq and Syria.

Zia had tried to wet nurse a fresh breed of 'piously' groomed political class in the country again, perhaps, simplistically thinking that he could do so and ended up giving us one of the most unethical bunch of men in the shape of Muslim League (N) led by Sharifs, a family of brazenly money hungry clan with no sense of propriety, history or Pakistan Movement. This selection and grooming was by design, little did he know that the eggs he hatched would bring forth demons who would plunder national treasury like none before and would become the major antagonists of their mother nursery; the Army. He foisted PPP on this hapless nation, again to our lasting regret, by default. That is he hanged Bhutto and thus gave him proverbial nine lives of a cat. Between them, Bhuttos and Sharifs have plundered and ransacked this country like the British did in 1857 or even worse. Zia also reinforced the legacy of military takeovers to the detriment of our political evolution and left behind a legion of unprincipled and self-centered politicians who quickly began manipulations to grab state power after his death. Zia's rule also conclusively demonstrated military's institutional incompetence and unsuitability to manage political affairs.

Soon Benazir became the Prime Minister who was infamously signposted by Asif Zardari, the super privileged husband, instantly gaining an unenviable nickname Mr 10% for his standard cut in every major state contract. Before her swearing in, she was reportedly interviewed by the COAS Gen Aslam Baig for her fitness to lead the country. Strange to say, the least but stranger was the time when she was requested to visit GHQ for necessary briefing particularly about Afghan war which was still raging. She came with her main Cabinet colleagues which included late Gen Nasrullah Babar, Iqbal Akhund, Ghulam Sarwar Cheema and quite a few others. She was to be received outside COAS's office by Gen Baig himself. He came out a few minutes before her arrival, went back and reappeared without his headgear. That was queer but sent out a wrong message that was how the new Prime Minister was to be regarded .She sat bolt upright till the end of hours of rigorous briefing, took copious notes and asked intelligent questions. Her interest in Afghan war was noteworthy. As if on getting a whiff immediately Nawaz Sharif, true to his grousy but scheming nature, started actively courting GHQ and poisoning their ears against PPP govt.

Soon political temperature started to become uncomfortable between Punjab and PPP at the centre. It was probably '91 when the then CM Punjab Nawaz Sharif ordered DG Rangers Lahore to physically throw Governor Punjab Chaudhry Altaf Hussain out of the Governor House. DG Rangers had the maturity to tell the CM office to consult HQ Corps V Lahore first. Had that illegal order been obeyed it would have set a very dangerous precedence but quite suited to supra legal Don-like mindset of the Sharifs which came into full play later on.

In the aftermath of demolition of Babri Mosque it was again reckless and coarsely thoughtless Nawaz Sharif who provoked people to protest in force next day and did nothing to safeguard private or public property or Hindu properties/temples in Punjab against charged crowds.. As a result mullahs inflamed popular sentiments in their sermons, people came out

in large unruly numbers, ransacked whatever was left of a few Hindu temples and inflicted heavy damage upon shops, traffic signals and roadside buildings. Lahore was the worst affected where Nawaz Sharif was nowhere to be found. I was then posted as a senior staff officer at Corps Headquarters Lahore. It was with great difficulty and at personal peril that I was able to save Jain Mandir Lahore from definite destruction from a highly emotive crowd. This was a typically devious Nawaz performance that became hallmark of his defective personality in years to come; provoke people and back out when going gets tough.

It had to be Zia's prodigal political heir Nawaz Sharif to be naturally foolish enough to poke the army in its ribs in 1998, to once again take over. He tried to cause COAS' plane crash along with civil passengers on board by an utterly novel but uncharacteristically brilliant method of mass murder. He issued orders to prevent army chief's PIA plane landing anywhere in the country while the fuel was running out, hoping that the plane will crash once the tanks are empty. This was a terribly evil plan. The Army intervened and NS was shown the door, tried and jailed. His life was saved by the Saudi largesse and inauspicious intervention. Another round of military rule began in the country which is still fresh in the memory not for its merits but for the miseries and ignominy it inflicted upon the country including Kargil disaster. While late Zia espoused outward Islamic morality, Musharraf patronized playboyish cavalier swagger to undo Zia's deceitful legacy and as a personal habit. That introduced a sense of official fickle mindedness and added to sub ideological confusion among armed forces in particular and civilian cadres in general.

Edge of a precipice? – Part 3
April 15, 2021

Mahboob Qadir
The tables turned in Afghanistan as the trail of attack over World Trade Center and elsewhere on 9/11 was traced back to Taliban regime in Afghanistan and to OBL's Al-Qaeda sheltered by them. The US prepared to reinvade Afghanistan and needed Pakistan again as the launch pad but with a reversed role, that is to oppose Afghan Taliban this time around.US had got us and itself into an unenviable position to declare its past allies, the Afghan Mujahideen as terrorists and attack them. India was sitting on the jump seat should Pakistan decline the request .This was a real military-diplomatic dilemma which required great statesmanship and vision, so dismally absent in Gen Musharraf and his close colleagues. They opted for an inexplicable compromise which could be partially described as hunting with the hounds and running with the hare. This compromise was typically done with little strategic thought, scant care for the consequences and very cheaply too. The country was made available for US military campaign against Taliban, simultaneously trying to preserve those factions which seemingly favoured Pakistan. It was naively hoped that such an exercise would not be uncovered or at the least not misread by the US. Musharraf did not know the famous Pushtoon dictum that an Afghan keeps the secret till the money lasts.

US invaded Afghanistan with the local help of Northern Alliance who had parted ways with Afghan Mujahideen and soon the Afghan Taliban foot soldiers and left over command structure began to pour back into Pakistan under pressure from the advancing US forces. Kabul had fallen. They renewed their old local support infrastructure and this time began a two front guerilla war against the US Forces in Kabul and Pakistani Forces at home. Musharraf also compounded our internal disharmony by incompetent and thickheaded handling of Lal Masjid uprising in Islamabad; a truly Deobandi hornet's nest. It provided

casus belli to TTP for the massive murder and mayhem campaign that they unleashed upon Pakistan for the next 10 years where thousands of civilians, LEA personnel and soldiers were killed and immeasurable damage was done to property. Horrendous Army Public School Peshawar massacre 2014 was the nadir of TTP's undiluted savagery which shook even the most placid of them all, the sitting Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Stutteringly Pakistan Army was given the go ahead to wipe out TTP terror hide outs from South Waziristan. Thus began one of the most successful counterterrorism kinetic operations in the world so far. It was also the most fiercely contested by the terrorists where Pakistan Army ably helped by PAF wrote superlative tales of bravery, selflessness and comradeship. We lost the flower of our youth, the best officers and men in this unforgiving combat but rid our country of that savage menace completely.

The surviving terrorists expectedly escaped to Afghanistan as US and Afghan forces refused to seal the border while Pakistan was surrounding and eliminating terrorists in FATA. Fugitive terrorists are fed, equipped and sheltered by Afghan NDS in conjunction with RAW in neighboring areas of Nangarhar, Paktika, Kunar and Nooristan. These renegades are their terror assets who act as agent saboteurs when launched inside Pakistan. Of these Jamat-ul-Ahrar is the leading and the most belligerent ex-Pakistan fugitive outfit based in Nangarhar, Afghanistan. Core ISIS fighters when faced with annihilation in Iraq were airlifted to Afghanistan in unmarked helicopters by the US and transplanted along Pakistan border at the flank of CPEC and in Urzugan in the northwest just under the belly of BRI. That should indicate the strategic intent behind this exercise and also who really controls ISIS. It was also part of the strategic design to plant a force in being which could be used as a counter weight to check expanding Taliban influence in Afghanistan, checkmate Ashraf Ghani should he have ideas and keep Pakistan's western border hot as a measure of coercion.

All said and done, the very presence of ISIS in Afghanistan provides an insurance to US for its continued force deployment in one form or the other. Thus be able to reasonably fix China, radiate sufficient threat to Russia from this land base and finally reasonably reign in an intransigent Pakistan. ISIS's insertion into Afghan theatre proved to be a God sent tool for India to twist Pakistan's tail from that country. NSA Doval flew to Baghdad to co-opt and coordinate ISIS leadership in his intelligence plan to synchronize their terrorist efforts with TTP to create a synergy against Pakistan. He got them together near Kandahar and worked out modalities of joint operations. Later he went on to induct Baloch dissidents into this evil alliance. Thus what we see in Balochistan today, in particular, is a direct consequence of Indian machinations which operationalise greater US strategy to set up a controlled chaos in that region so as to retard CPEC progress and eventually tame Pakistan to sit by the sofa leg. Lately Indians have bankrolled to create a singularity of command among various factions of TTP fugitives in Afghanistan and encouraged PTM to mount a nastier discrediting campaign in ex FATA and KP against Pakistan Army.

Musharraf was ousted in 2007 and the musical chair of national power this time was occupied by Zardari who had taken over PPP after Benazir's very suspicious looking assassination and its inconclusive, open-ended investigation. This time he came into his own and dug deep into national treasury, typically planted his cronies on key government positions and let US undercover men and women flood Pakistan unhindered. His ambassador at Washington DC Husain Haqani is reported to have issued thousands of visas to such people in a day without the mandatory clearance by the country's intelligence agencies or the interior ministry. Hundreds of houses in Islamabad alone were hired by notorious Blackwater agents.US was allowed to build the largest Embassy compound, possibly in the world, in Islamabad. He was succeeded by Nawaz Sharif at the Hill as agreed

among the robbers.

Sharif padded up for his third inning with a vengeance and surrounded himself with a strange legion of anti-army, India-centric media men and retired bureaucrats and highly dubious financial scammers. This was a puzzling potpourri of men and women that placed Sharif in grey shade right from the start and he seemed to know what he was doing. Therefore without wasting time he plunged into scrounging out whatever he and his younger brother Shahbaz Sharif, the Chief Minister Punjab, could from the national treasury. This family's loot is immense, immeasurably heartless and massive in scale done with the Lord Clive like abandon just as he looted Murshadabad treasury after the fall of Nawab Sirajudaula. His excesses were uncovered by the Panama Leaks which became his undoing and eventually the Supreme Court disqualified him for life and unseated him. He went on to be convicted by the accountability court too, feigned sickness , bribed the doctors, court and hoodwinked the system to fly out to safety in UK from where he has no plans to return. Meanwhile the country's high court have declared him an absconder from law and issued his permanent non-bailable arrest warrants. This is a travesty of political sense and ethical sensibility of uniquely Pakistan variety where a three times prime minister is a convict and a fugitive from law. It also is a proof how he corrupted the entire system and electoral process repeatedly to befool electorate and the law. Nawaz Sharif eminently deserves a place of honour in the world gallery of rogues.

He has been defeated at the ballot and succeeded by an enigmatic Imran Khan and his PTI cohorts. There are a number of dichotomies in PTI governance which cannot be explained away by merely saying those were electioneering slogans and if not, then the newcomers are too proud or embarrassed to admit they were either wrong or over ambitious. Foremost is their lukewarm resolve as the state to take on and reign in the powerful but corrupt elites as opposed to their avowed declarations from the street.

This has resulted in a terrible loss of face and credibility among the people. This administration is characterised by its sputtering governance performance, talks through their hat by the federal ministers, a disgusting tendency to repeatedly reverse vastly impacting policy decisions, inability to control inflation and its pinion rider run away commodity prices and how to equate with the provocative political opposition. Add to their fits and starts type writ the very embarrassing scandals of sugar, petroleum and wheat shortages where Imran Khan's close associates are implicated.

The latest is the typical but again diplomatic faux pa where a federal minister announced ECC decision to import sugar and cotton from India and next day PM turns it down. That was a terribly foolish stroke which resulted in a rare mutual loss of face with the federal cabinet and rightly became a butt of jokes locally and internationally.

This sad saga goes on and on regardless of which colour of the party flag flutters before the PM house. Imran Khan has to step away from his confrontational style of politics and begin to behave like a seasoned confident politician. He must speak in a different genre and on a superior moral plain. His talk and actions must reflect statesman like vision, a feel for the people and a genuine concern for the nation's wellbeing. There should be poise and grace in his speech and body language both. He must relearn to relate to people and that authority and agitation together are a sign of incompetence.

We have been mugged on the Mall and our ramshackle ark pirated in the midstream. We have been time and again blindfolded and led by the ear to the slaughter block for either

national security, jihad, sectarian purity or even loan repayment and cheated every time .We have been robbed and disrobed to be beggars, destitute, peasants tillers and durbar hall attendants of petty chieftains, crime lords, centurions and sardars holding their own courts all over the country. Those who were to dispense solace and peace of mind led us from their pulpit into the holy abattoir of faith, chopped it into pieces and refashioned them into blood thirsty sectarian monsters, militancy and murder. We do not deserve the way we have been treated over the years particularly at the hands of those whom we are supposed to have elected or allowed to rule over us. Enough is enough and it must stop now, but will not till people of Pakistan stand up and demand the respect our due and the rights we deserve.